Invading the Metropolis. Thugs and "Oriental Criminals" between Victorian and Postcolonial Stories

Federica Zullo

Abstract
This essay focuses on the Indian novel *The Thing about Thugs* (2010) by Tabish Khair, set between London and the Indian region of Bihar. Its peculiar events and characters help us reflect on the mutual influences between the colony (India) and the Metropolis, on the relationship regarding the transmission of knowledge and the construction of the colonial criminal. Starting from Meadows Taylor's *Confessions of a Thug*, to which the novel is strictly connected, it will be interesting to follow Khair's itinerary across the different narratives of the Thug's symbolic, political and social meanings, in mid – and late Victorian times, from Dickens' *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* to Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone* and Conan Doyle's *The Sign of Four* and *The Mystery of Cloomber*. Through Khair's novel it will be possible to trace significant elements that contribute to the debate around criminality and control, the problematisation of authority, both at the centre and in the peripheries of the Empire.

Key words: thugs, victorian literature, postcolonialism.

1. Thugs in history and literature

The Thing about Thugs (2010) is the third novel published by Tabish Khair, an Indian writer and academic currently based in Denmark. Set between London and the Indian region of Bihar, it moves from the present day back to the late 1830s, presenting characters and events related to the mutual influences – conflicting, problematic, fruitful – between the colony and the metropolis and, in particular, to the presence of India in Victorian Britain. As the novel makes specific reference to the cult of *Thuggee* and imagines the story of a man falsely accused of being a thug and taken from India to England in late 1830s, this paper aims to explore how the figure of the Indian thug began to haunt British popular imagery and literature and

how its presence has been used and revised over the course of time. The word "thug" is used in the English language to mean anyone who perpetrates mindless violence, but it once had a very specific meaning. Thugs were Indian roadside bandits, originally from what is now Madhya Pradesh in central India, who strangled and robbed unwary travellers, having previously befriended them. The word comes from the Sanskrit *sthag*, meaning to deceive or trick, and entered the English vocabulary at the beginning of nineteenth century.

Tabish Khair openly refers to Victorian canonical novels (in which uncanny and ghostly figures from the Indian subcontinent start to make their appearance) and to postcolonial rewritings of the same figures, in order to explore issues such as the processes of criminalisation and racialisation of the colonial subject. The work stimulates a reflection on the extent of "colonial contamination" of the nineteenth century metropolis, which was at the same time a hybrid and divided space, where the borders between criminality and order easily shift across social classes and racial differences. This paper aims at showing Khair's convincing re-writing of various nineteenth century narratives on thugs, through open references to and the revision of particular works of literature on the theme, starting first of all with Philip Meadows Taylor's *Confessions of a Thug* (1838), which contributed the word thug to the English language and imagery, and then continuing with examples from Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins.

The writer operates on a number of different levels. Philip Meadows Taylor's text, *Confessions of a Thug,* appears as an invented treatise called *Notes on a Thug: Character and Circumstances* by some Captain William T. Meadows. This is combined with the epistolary story of a second narrator, Amir Ali, an Indian brought to England by the same Captain Meadows who believes Ali is a penitent thug and needs to be saved from a tragic destiny. Captain Meadows believes Amir Ali to be the perfect specimen of a subcontinental criminal to show to his friends at the London Society of Phrenology, founded in 1823 and extremely active in those years. When he takes him in front of the Police Major, his future son-in-law, he boasts of his charge,

"the joker in his pack, the thug from India". There he stood, a criminal by the look of him; he had a low, cunning appearance, though he was not as

dark as the Major had expected him to be, more like a gypsy than a nigger. He was dressed in resplendent Oriental robes, something the Major would never have permitted, and he even spoke English. His head, which had just been callipered and commented on for perhaps the hundredth time by Captain Meadows, was almost a perfect oval, smooth, with dark, half-curling hair, and he had a small, carefully clipped and waxed moustache with pointy ends. (Khair 2010: 32)

Amir is observed as an exotic and disturbing object, his physical and symbolic presence is at the service of those who have constructed a false story around him. The continuous narrative which shifts between *Notes on a Thug* and the adventures of Amir Ali in London serves to remind the reader of the process through which the Other as Indian and as Criminal was produced at a certain time, through observation, description and arbitrary deductions. This refers to the corpus of writings on the Indian subcontinent that as early as the 1770s had started to circulate and convey notions regarding that vast territory, its economy, languages, sanitary conditions and criminality.

The colonial government in India was seriously committed to acquiring knowledge on indigenous cultural forms, which in turn were distorted by the same project which was seeking to understand them. The difficulty of controlling and governing an increasingly expanding colonial space led to structured procedures for gathering information and the vast production of travelogues, statistics, informative periodicals and encyclopaedias. Classification and categorisation were keywords for the East India Company administrators, from flora and fauna to religions and castes. All this contributed to bringing India into the European popular imagination, as Marriott explains:

Partial, incomplete and replete with contradictions this project may have been, but it possessed sufficient power to help secure and maintain British dominance. This power derived from its sheer ambition; few in Indian society were left untouched by the hands of surveyors, census, enumerators, photographers and cartographers. What underpinned the project was an empiricism that, by reducing colonial knowledge to factual statements about observable reality, made possible the bringing together onto a common epistemological terrain not only the different forms of evidence […] but also of different disciplines (anthropology, history, sociology, science) and of different spaces (Indian regions, London). (Marriott 2003: 5-6)

As an example, the publication of the *East India Gazetteer*, started by Walter Hamilton in 1815, helped to build a concise compendium on India destined to remain one of the most popular on the subject for a long time, together with works such as James Forbes' *Oriental Memoirs: a Narrative of Seventeen Years Residence in India* (1813), in which emerges the idea of a close link between the Indian climate, humid and torrid, and the population, so weak, passive and nervous. As he underlines: "from this habitual indolence they become capable of exertion; and thus the laws, manners, and customs, are at this day as they were some thousand years ago" (in Marriott 2003: 145). Forbes had even attempted an anthropological division of Indian people, in which those inhabiting the lowlands, Malabar and Bengal, were considered more effeminate and passive in relation to the mountain people such as the Sikh and Rajput, who were seen as predatory and rude. Another popular work such as the *Memoir on the Expediency of an Ecclesiastical for British India* (1805) by the missionary Claudius Buchanan, then nominated Chaplain for Bengal, generally describes the Hindustani as having negative virtues, with an attitude to sanguinary rites such as *sati*, child sacrifices and the drowning of people in the Ganges. According to Buchanan, this lack of morality could only be cured through massive evangelisation, but the criminal groups referred to as thugs and dacoits (another anglicised term of Indian languages to designate thieves, bandits and killers) were beyond any kind of civilizing mission, they were simply categorised, like the tribal populations, as savages.

This typology of criminals became the focus of writings on the people of India. Henry Spry, a member of the Bengal Medical Staff, wrote in his *Modern India; with Illustrations of the Resources and Capabilities of Hindustan* (1837) that the Bengalese had totally degenerate social relations and a natural aptitude to deceit and fraud. As early as 1772, dacoits were considered to be professional, even born, thieves, and Warren Hastings, the first Governor-General of Bengal, in order to eradicate an increasing criminal problem, started to extend penalties not only to the offenders, but also to their families and entire villages. However, colonial administrators would continue to be bothered by bandit groups assaulting military camps until the first decades of the nineteenth century. Thugs dominated British fears of the limits of colonial knowledge and surveillance. Despite having a nomadic existence like dacoits and

pindaris (thieves at the service of Marathi Chiefs), thugs were seen as unique in their kind, natural born killers who worshipped the Hindu Goddess Kali, a fact that confirmed the evil of the Hindu character, that being its extreme heathenism.

In 1815 the practice of *Thuggee* is officially recognised as an organised crime, the Thuggee and Dacoity Department is instituted and due to the efforts of Colonel Sleeman, Assistant and Governor General in Northern India who even published several books on the cult, the great narrative on thugs began to be told. The Thuggee Act in 1836 represented the most significant intervention of the Empire in India within the sphere of criminality and Sleeman assumed the task of revealing to the West the nature of thugs and their capture. He studied the case scientifically, following methods of criminal detection and investigation, and trying to understand their secret language, the *ramasee*, but the concept of *Thuggee* was resistant to rationalism and despite many publications on the subject, no clear explanation of the phenomenon was given. As Parama Roy sustains:

> There is an ongoing and strenuous endeavour in the discourse of Thuggee to interpellate the thug as an essence, a move which attests to the anxiety of rupture that subtends the totalizing epistemologies of colonialism. Yet, the thug as discursive object is strikingly resistant to such fixity; he is all things to all people. […] *Thuggee*, I would suggest, introduces a disturbance in the paradigm of information retrieval. (Roy 1998: 55)

Not being included within a definite caste nor religion, *Thuggee* stands at the margins of both and for this reason it generates curiosity, anxiety and extreme fear. Among the many thugs arrested there were respectable members of the villages and towns, businessmen, even Muslims and soldiers working for the East India Company. Their ambiguous identity made the whole problem of thugs intriguing and extremely popular, epic and mythological, both in India and in England.

In 1840 thousands of thugs were captured and a process of ethnological classification was enacted. Henry Spry, medical official in Sagar, sent seven skulls of thugs to the Phrenological Society of Edinburgh, in order to deliberate in terms of tribal societies. However, campaigns against thugs were mostly justified by the increased Raj insecurity: frontiers were not safe or easily

controllable, and in the 1830s there had been frequent rebellions and the panic about thugs became a well-constructed response to the fear of nomadic Indian tribes. According to P. Mukherjee, the concept of *Thuggee*, functional to the extension of colonial power, "was one of the ways of representing India that could justify the massive incursion of the colonialist administrative panoply in the name of constructing an archival 'knowledge' about the essence of the country" (2003: 101).

The native resistance to satisfying the coloniser's need for narration represents a frustration for the strategy of nineteenth century surveillance. As Bhabha underlines: "The incalculable native produces a problem for civil representation in the discourses of literature and legality" (1994: 99). And the thug was at the centre of this problem of calculation, so that the volume published by Philip Meadows Taylor to which Tabish Khair directly refers, was the coloniser's attempt to illustrate the heart of darkness of *Thuggee* and elevate the British justice system.

Meadows Taylor had been sent to India at the age of fifteen, to work for a merchant in Bombay, but he was soon appointed to a civil servant position and had the opportunity to study the languages and customs of the peoples of India. He studied law, geology and archaeology, working alternatively as an engineer, judge, artist and teacher. During one of his returns to England he published the *Confessions of a Thug,* a successful work reprinted in two editions in the first four months and, between 1887 and 1897, four more times. It is an adventurous picaresque tale, defined by Patrick Brantlinger as being like Kipling's *Kim*, a novel "on the road" (Brantlinger 2009: 132).

The narrator, Aamer Ali, tells his own story of a confessed but impenitent thug, with detailed descriptions of his successful killings and incredible acts of violence. He is a native informant for Colonel Taylor, and his narration, sober in its mode, does not display an excess of Orientalisms. Yet, it follows the typical colonial narrative of the time, as after confessing his long series of crimes, the thug addresses himself to British justice and asks for a fair and official trial. His story either fascinates or distresses the reader, who, as Brantlinger notes, "can take pleasure in knowing that the master Thug is under lock and key, that the horrible secrets of *Thuggee* can be revealed to her in the safety of home, and that the British imperial police, including

Taylor himself, are stamping it out" (Brantlinger 2009: 132). The thug's story is symbolically included, following Boehmer's analysis, "within the framework of the British justice system" (Boehmer 1995: 73) and undoubtedly reinforces the image of the British as "natural imperialists" like the ancient Romans, sustaining a fair and just legal system, benevolent and responsible.

Confessions of a Thug is part of a series of works in which the colonial perspective stands as authority, especially from the mid-nineteenth century onward, when Europeans in India, like the same Meadows Taylor, perceived themselves as scientists, "rational, neutral gatherers of knowledge" (p. 73). Aamer Ali emerges as a romantic hero, a sort of Indian Robin Hood who acts in a territory without law and order, exciting and extremely beautiful, but characterised by degradation and barbarism. Like Kipling's Kim he is an orphan and instead of joining the British Secret Service, as Kim does, he is initiated to the *Thuggee* and becomes a powerful and respected leader. Thug society is represented as the perverse antithesis of the Raj system, yet there are some analogies between a secret service and a criminal order: rigid laws, division of labour and code language. Taylor does not negate the Indians a proper morality and great heroism. However, not only does Aamer Ali operate on the wrong side of the law, he also disturbs British order over the colonial territory and thus becomes the perfect example of the Oriental criminal in a society the British wanted to reform and change.

> Colonialist fiction acknowledged the authority which the European scrutinizer wielded by living narrative form to anthropological findings. *Confessions of a Thug* is narrated for the information of those in England, the details which emerge are intended to satisfy the listening Englishman's appetite for local custom and to provide the kind of knowledge that will make colonial rule more effective. (Boehmer 1995: 73)

The demand for narration addressing the native contains the dangerous and ambiguous coloniser's question: "Tell us why we are here", the dark side of the narcissistic authority, the paranoia of power. The thug's confessions, with all their "truths" and his request for fair judicial treatment, represent the constant game of colonial ambiguity, in Bhabha's words, "the repeated fantasy of the native as

in-between legality and illegality, endangering the boundaries of the truth itself" (Bhabha 1994: 100).

2. "Because, my Dear, I am not Amir Ali, the Thug…"

The whole context of the imagery of the thug that invaded the metropolis through Meadows Taylor's work is useful for understanding the way in which Khair counter-reads the book while creating the story of Amir Ali.

Khair's alleged thug, at the centre of the Empire, is subjected to the scientific schizophrenia of the time and the distorted, prejudiced vision of the Other. However, the Society of Phrenology is portrayed as a group of professed intellectuals only interested in collecting the largest number of "Things" (human skulls) for personal interest by the cruellest means. Amir Ali agrees to be taken on the ship by Captain Meadows to escape from family conflict and so allows the Captain to believe he is a thug, but he only shares his true identity with other subalterns he meets in London's East End, lascars, sailors, servants, a multicultural microcosm within the Imperial metropolis that the postcolonial writer is able to illustrate. And his beloved Jenny, a servant in the Captain's mansion, keeps Amir's secrets:

> I wish, perhaps, to have an account of myself in words other than the ones Kaptaan Meadows uses in his notebook, the carefully inscribed pages he intends to turn into a book about the infamous institution of thuggee and my fledging career in what he calls "ritual murder". Because my dear, I was not, I am not what the Kaptaan wants me to be – I am not Amir Ali, the Thug. […] There are moments when I feel guilty about the stories I have embroidered for him. No, I would not say I have lied to him, for I have told him what he wanted to hear… (Khair 2010: 26)

Khair shows the inconsistency in the accumulation of colonial knowledge, its voids, misunderstandings, the colonizers' will to conform the Other to their own models and requirements. The repetition of the fixed identity of the Other enables the signifier of the authoritative power to be always in search of a strategy of surveillance, subjection and inscription: "Both colonizer and colonized are in a process of miscognition where each point of identification is always a double and partial repetition of the

otherness of the self – democrat and despot, individual and servant, native and child" (Bhabha 1994: 97).

Amir, in East End London, in a scene that immediately suggests the darkest Dickensian landscapes from *Oliver Twist, Nicholas Nickleby* up to *Our Mutual Friend*, is suddenly placed within the framework of racial "in-scription" and thus involved in the investigation of a series of mysterious killings leaving the victims beheaded. Though the references are to 1830s London, it often seems as if Khair is travelling back and forth across the length of Victorian times, reproducing atmospheres and situations more associated with the sixties up to the eighties, to Jack the Ripper and the Whitechapel murders. It is a cosmopolitan environment in which racial and class conflicts render the idea, in McLaughlin's words, "that metropolitan London and Londoners, far from being the antithesis of those colonial and imperial places and peoples that comprised the British Empire, were actually their curious doubles" (McLaughlin 2000: 5). London emerges as an amalgam of multiple frontiers, ranging from that "vast cesspool" Doctor Watson refers to in Conan Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet*, and the Oriental, luxurious interiors of West End apartments in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Such a mixed society is made visible in different parts of Khair's novel and the character of Jenny's aunt, Qui Hy, is emblematic. Arriving in England as the Indian *ayah* of a white family which later rejects her, she ends up running an opium den with her Irish husband. The couple of "new migrants" becomes the reference point for people of diverse origins and social conditions, from notable wealthy men to marginal and criminal subjects, given that the use of opium was certainly not class bound.

> Because Ayah Qui Hy is 'someone' in those crooks and crannies of London in which you may find asleep, a dozen to the floor, lascars and ex-slaves, ayahs and prostitutes of the poorest sorts, gypsies and stowaways, urchins and pickpockets. People know her. And she knows people. (Khair 2010: 57)

The woman becomes a key figure in the narrative and she is able to offer solutions and directions for the problems presented at her place. She is willing to discover what lies behind the beheadings in the East End and acts as a very unusual kind of detective, one

usually more compatible with contemporary postcolonial characters. According to Ed Christian, "[postcolonial detectives] like their fellow citizens, [...] must decide whether to act within the law [...] or to circumvent it. But they must also decide between justice and mercy, making adjustments in the law where it works to oppress" (Christian 2010: 285)[1]. Qui Hy does the primary work of a postcolonial detective, that is surveillance, "and part of that surveillance is observing the disparities, ironies, hybridities, and contradictions of both the empire and the indigenous culture" (Christian 2010: 285). Through this character, Khair shows marginalisation at work, using it as a source of strength. Amir Ali and his friends finally solve the murder mystery for which Amir had been falsely imprisoned. The Metropolitan police are depicted as being dominated by arbitrary conceptions of criminal society, influenced by common public beliefs and sensational articles such as those written by the fictional character of journalist Daniel Oates[2] and reported in the novel. It seems that police detective work is not conducted in the name of the fair British Justice system, but rather conforming to the 'us and them' dichotomy of colonial society.

It was the sort of crime one only associates with other, hotter climes, with people reared on superstitions and barbarities, and not on the milk of

[1] An appropriate comparison can be made with Vikram Chandra's first novel, *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (1995), where, in the chapter based in London, the main character Sanjay, recently arrived from India, helps the Police Inspector to solve a case of serial killings. Sanjay is not believed until he pretends to be English and it is his hybrid identity that is the key to discover something the Inspector cannot understand. The whole novel is, among many other things, a profound counter-narrative on the knowledge produced on India by British scientists and administrators in the nineteenth century.

[2] It is interesting to notice that the name Daniel Oates may be a reference to Tobias Oates, the writer who, in turn, is suggestive of Charles Dickens in Peter Carey's novel *Jack Maggs* (1997). Here Oates manipulates the former convict Jack Maggs, preventing the colonial Other from exercising his right to narrate his own story; as M.R. Dolce explains, on Maggs's "criminal mind", Tobias reflects "the removed shadows of his society […] Maggs opposes the attempt of forging his own identity, being aware that the work produced by Oates will only enchain him for the rest of his life, continuing a stigmatized and prejudiced image of the colonial subject" (Dolce 2004: 159). In Khair's novel, both Captain Meadows and the journalist Oates try to mould the same kind of image concerning Amir's identity.

human mercy that flows through Christian veins in the lands of civilizations. (Khair 2010: 119)

[...] But it has been whispered in the streets that the murderer is some heathen, recently imported into our parts, who either practices a devilish and esoteric rite or consumes human flesh. […] Whatever may be his identity, perhaps it is time to think about the nature and significance of all the goods that are brought into the docks of England by its mighty fleet of globe-spanning ships. (p. 209)

Amir had always been aware of the kind of prejudice cast upon him in London, when for example some boys on the street called him "an 'Oriental despot' who kept women like cattle in his harem" (p. 69). To his beloved Jenny/Janaam he communicates his discomfort, "Your city is deeply segregated, much more than any city I saw in my land" (p. 54). The presumed thug is the perfect target for those who see the Indian as mere criminal. The Captain's servant, Nelly, is Amir's most ferocious accuser and repeatedly insults him: "Lordey! Thugs, murderers, cannibals – this city is no place for a decent woman; thuggism on the streets, no wonder…" (p. 97). Here, the conditions of working-class women and discourses on race are interconnected; Khair highlights different marginalities and shows the troubled relationships between them. Yet, these people are given a voice, they express their perspective on events, their points of view, something the postcolonial writer usually does when setting up a dialogue with canonical texts where marginal figures were usually silenced[3]. As M.R. Dolce underlines in this regard, "the re-writing of canonical novels is among the most efficient strategies of decolonisation postcolonial writers have undertaken, having as its main objective to go beyond the dismantling of a discourse of oppression and containment, prospecting instead alternative modes of self-perception and a renovated vision of the world" (Dolce 2004: 160)[4].

[3] An interesting example can be observed in the almost unique colonial subject of Dickens's novels, Major Bagstock's servant in *Dombey and Son.* Unnamed, called "the Native", "unfortunate foreigner" or "dark exile" for the whole novel, he is seen by Mr Dombey's domestic staff, in particular by the women, as a dreadful figure, not a common servant but someone extremely Other, with animal behaviour.

[4] Where not indicated, translations from Italian texts are mine.

Khair reveals a metropolis suspended in a gothic and ghostly atmosphere, added to by the spatial and temporal distance recreated by the author, from present-dayIndia to Victorian London:

> This is what I see across time space. This is what I see from the gloaming of my grandfather's library, surrounded by Dickens and Collins; this is what I see from a whitewashed house in Phansa. I see a place in London more than a hundred years ago. In…what year is it…in 1837, the year of the coronation of Queen Victoria. I see a room. I see – what is that? (Khair 2010: 11)

As already mentioned, in the book's first pages we immediately enter the physical and symbolic realm of the literary canon. The grandfather's library contains the great volumes of English Literature, but the novel shows how it is possible to read them from an enlarged and renewed perspective, by representing Victorian times from the present day, filling the gaps, uncovering new aspects and hidden sceneries. If *The Thing about Thugs* can be included in the diversified and now popular category of the so-called neo-Victorian novels, which, following S. J. Carroll, "locate or restore eclipsed narratives of the Victorian past [and] might complicate our understanding of the nineteenth century" (Carroll 2010: 180), it also represents the Victorian past acting as a mirror through which a series of contemporary themes are examined, regarding for example: "the deliberate complication of the supposedly separate jurisdictions of history and fiction; […] and the imaginative restoration of voices lost or constrained in the past, with repercussions for the present (p. 180).

3. Oriental "criminals" in England: Dickens and Collins

The opening scene of *The Thing about Thugs* is set in an opium den run by the Indian woman Qui Hy and we cannot avoid making obvious reference to the first pages of Dickens's last unfinished novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870). In both cases we find people caught between sleep and wakefulness, inebriated by opium smoke and watched by a woman who knows them and their life. Belonging to different social classes, they would never meet outside the den but here their common addiction to opium makes them close and intimate. In Dickens's novel, as Sheila Smith observes,

"the East End dockland is described as a nightmare territory alien to order and peace. John Jasper penetrates its jungle in search of the false peace induced by opium" (Smith 1980: 204). *Drood* is certainly the most orientalised of Dickens's novels, both for the description of Oriental objects and commodities in Cloisterham houses, and for the real presence of people from the East who become central characters, the Landless twins from British Ceylon. Neville Landless is immediately accused of Edwin Drood's disappearance and is taken by the police; all the prejudices regarding a non-English or half-English person are used to reinforce and justify the accusation upon him. If in Dickens's novel, the opium woman seems to play a key-role at the end of the unfinished story, maybe leading to Jasper's hidden secrets, in *The Thing about Thugs* it seems that the author wants to carry on the work initiated by the Dickensian character, allowing Qui Hyi to find a way to solve the murders and becoming an authority even for the police, who have to admit her deceitfulness.

The whole context of the opium den illustrated by Khair offers a renewed vision of such a popular place in Victorian England, often stigmatised and isolated by the various accounts and social documentaries. The so-called "Victorian drug culture" involved people with no distinction, opium dens were located in the middle of very busy streets and suburbs, visited day and night by customers from different parts of London and from abroad. On this, Matthew Sweet, in *Inventing the Victorians*, reconstructs a series of well documented stories of business, politics and love affairs among the Chinese, Indians and English in Shadwell, the most central and unsuspected part of the East End, and not in Limehouse, the extreme part of it, usually associated with Chinese criminality in the collective imagery. Sweet starts his journey of research from *Drood*'s opening scene, explaining where the place that inspired those pages really was, and reminding us of the fact that Dickens himself, his close friend Wilkie Collins and many other journalists and intellectuals of the time were nonchalant participators in the Victorian Drug Culture. "For the entirety of Victoria's Reign, the narcotic substances that are criminalised in our society remained easily obtainable through legal channels" (Sweet 2001: 102).

Opium was one of the Oriental "invaders" of the metropolis, a product of the Empire, associated, in Dickens's novel, with

other dangerous practices coming from India. The character of John Jasper in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* has been the subject of various critical interpretations, one of the most renowned being that of his double personality whose "evil" part could be related to the cult of Thuggee. According to Edmund Wilson, Jasper embodied all the elements required to be a worshipper of Goddess Kali and a thug-style killer, a strangler. Furthermore, "[…] Mr. Jasper, who smokes opium and sees elephants in his trances, is described as having 'thick, lustrous, well-arranged black hair and whiskers' and a voice that sometimes sounds 'womanish' – in short, as something very much like a Hindu" (Wilson 1961: 78). Jasper's dark side is related to India and to all the negative stereotypes largely in use in British society at that time. According to Tim Dolin, *Drood*'s key-note is "the alarming social and racial displacements. […] The Orient has found its way to England, most obviously in the characters of Helena and Neville (hell and devil to the natives of Cloisterham), in Jasper's association with the Hindu *Thuggee* cult and in the related prehistories of the main protagonists and their families in Egypt". But the novel also depicts "an England already profoundly marked by an entrenched culture of imperialism – complacently superior, predatory, violent and, ironically, already profoundly Orientalised" (Dolin 1996: 94).

After the Mutiny of 1857, India was no longer the land of magic and wonder the British had admired during the Great Exhibition of 1851; it rather became, in the popular imagination and with the news of the Cawnpore massacre, a land of killers and rapists, having nothing to do with Meadows Taylor's romantic (and almost completely eradicated) thugs. Many intellectuals and writers changed their ideas on the subcontinent and in the 1860s a consistent series of so-called Mutiny novels were published. They were also called "revenge narratives", in which the central motif is the construction of a criminal India, where all the natives are rebels and descendants of thugs. However, this troubled period gave rise to criticism against the Raj government in the subcontinent and its penal system, initiating important debate in both India and England. Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868) can be inscribed within such a context, in a decade where racism infests British society and stereotypical constructions of criminal Indians, Africans

and West Indians are reinforced. Thus, Collins's use of the three Indians who claim their jewel and even succeed in bringing it back to India, represents an extraordinary and unusual narrative plot for that time. Following Pablo Mukherjee's analysis, the novel displays an "understanding of criminalization as an oppressive process of marginalization, an interrogation of the normal and the respectable in the light of this understanding, and the resultant critique of authority both at home and in the colony" (Mukherjee 2003: 187).

The sensational narrative in which *The Moonstone* (1868) is inscribed was becoming increasingly popular, questioning notions of domesticity, masculinity, madness and the newly arising theories on crime. The new literary genre showed how short the distance was between the self and the Others, something that provoked social and cultural anxiety. For example, the word "thug" had started to be applied not only to colonials but also to local criminals, causing controversy among critics and politicians. Anyone could become a thug, and in *The Moonstone* as well, the characters of the very British Colonel Herncastle, the first thief of the jewel, and the philanthropist Godfrey Ablewhite become emblems of the author's satire against the hypocrisy of philanthropy in Victorian England. As Lyn Pyckett observes: "As in *Armadale,* the main narrative of *The Moonstone* concerns the disruption of the tranquillity and order of genteel English life by a colonial legacy" (Pyckett 1994: 31). Tabish Khair certainly refers to this kind of disruption and reproduces it in his novel as a fragmented narrative of letters, documents and articles in much the same way as Collins had done.

What really creates fear in the characters in *The Moonstone* is the invasion from India of people who come to claim the jewel. The three Orientals, still silenced by the author, start to haunt the Verinder Estate and are reported as a foreign peril that can only disturb domestic life:

> Going round to the terrace, I found three mahogany-coloured Indians, in white linen frocks and trousers, looking up at the house. The Indians, as I saw on looking closer, had small hand-drums slung in front of them. Behind them stood a little delicate-looking light haired English boy carrying a bag. I judged the fellows to be strolling conjurors, and the boy with the bag to be carrying the tools of their trade. (Collins 1992: 17)

From this point the Indians in *The Moonstone* are often defined as jugglers or conjurors, lovers of disguise and deceit, especially by the butler Betteredge, who makes no distinction between the different figures.

They are alternatively called beggars, evils, heathens and even thugs, especially when the London jeweller Luker affirms "that he had been annoyed, at intervals throughout the day, by the proceedings of some of those strolling Indians who infest the streets" (p. 211); this is because, as Betteredge says at the end of his version: "the Devil's dance of the Indian Diamond has threaded its way to London; and to London you must go after it, leaving me at the country house" (p. 213).

Thug imagery emerges in the descriptions of the Orientals' attempts to regain their jewel. For example, Godfrey Ablewhite "had just the time to notice that the arm round his neck was naked and of a tawny-brown colour, before his eyes were bandaged, his mouth was gagged, and he was thrown helpless on the floor by (as he judged) two men" (p. 220). And Mr Luker is removed from the reading of Oriental manuscripts "by a tawny naked arm round his throat, by a bandage over his eyes, and by a gag in his mouth" (p. 223). These fearful situations reinforce racial stereotypes, but at the same time show the urban, modern space as something deeply contaminated and conflicting. As Tamar Heller affirms,

> the central image of this narrative, the theft of the Moonstone, represents an *exposé* of Victorian culture that recognizes the links between types of domination – of the colonizers over the colonized, of men over women, and of upper over the lower classes. […] Indeed the distinction between English and Indian, orderly interiors and disorderly exteriors, is most radically disrupted by the revelation that Blake stole the Moonstone. (Heller 1998: 245, 247)

Khair seems to be inspired by the way Collins introduced the theme of shifting criminality from the slum districts of London to the comfortable firesides of nineteenth-century suburbia and by the erosion of the fixed beliefs of identity, power and authority. Khair uses the figures of Indians as thugs, aware of how strong and deep-rooted such imagery is in Anglophone culture and literature.

We need only to reference the famous neo-Victorian novel, *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1975) by J. G. Farrell, set during the Mutiny of 1857, in which the most raging sepoys are described as having typical thug behaviour. Or, on another level, and with different narrative purposes, we could consider Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), a suspenseful detective story regarding research on malaria conducted by Sir Ronald Ross in India around the late 1890s, which tells of Ross's suspect native assistants and their strange actions. Their practices have something to do with the cult of Goddess Kali and the Western scholars who try to interpret them are irremediably punished.

Tabish Khair's novel elaborates on various literary sources in order to find the way to narrate Victorian times focusing on the issues of criminality and the Othering process. His work may belong to those postcolonial neo-Victorian novels which, in the words of A. Heilmann and M. Llewellyn, "seek to problematize the use of Victorian Orientalism and the postcolonial conceptualization of subalternity", interrogating politics of slavery, empire, race and oppression" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 28-9)[5]. Neo-Victorianism should be understood as a global Anglophone project which participates in trans-national debates on history and culture, and in which

> contemporary writers aim to reinterpret the identity politics of imperialism through giving voice not only to the colonial subject but also to writers and thinkers within the imperial elite. As such, the creative acts of reimagining serve as potent and important reminders of the complexities of terminologies, identities, and subjectivities. (p. 29)

Re-telling "things" about thugs is part of this literary practice, which opens up new perspectives for investigating the complexity of intertwined stories of colonial and postcolonial displacements.

[5] We can refer, apart from Khair's novel, to Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2008), the already mentioned *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* by Vikram Chandra and Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs*, Richard Flanagan's *Wanting* (2008) and Laura Fish's *Strange Music* (2008).

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